

Dedicated to Simone Weil

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Blake Senini, *Shape of the Light*, 1996.
Polyester resin. 232,5 x
231,3 x 22,5 cm. Photo:
Don Hall. Courtesy of
the MacKenzie Art
Gallery.

Western society is currently engaged in a process of reevaluating belief systems that have guided us for centuries. To the extent that we have outgrown these systems, this is a positive development. But in making the transition to a more enlightened state, it is inevitable we will experience moments of anxiety, doubt and fear. Given our present level of technological sophistication, and the consequent power this gives us to regulate our environment, this angst seems incongruous. But many people do feel a void in their lives. In this exhibition of seven sculptural installations, Calgary artist Blake Senini identifies an undercurrent of unrequited yearning that lies at the heart of our spiritual malaise.

Senini graduated from the University of Victoria with a BFA degree in 1975. He then received his MFA from the University of Calgary in 1981. Despite the western Canadian orientation of his education, Senini's work is somewhat of an anomaly here. "It relates more to European and Quebec sculpture than to most local work, where bronze, steel and clay

predominate," notes exhibition curator Timothy Long. "His practice is located somewhere between the architectural reference of Jocelyne Allouche, the play with meaning and material of Gilles Mihalcean, and the altered minimalism of Anish Kapoor. In its focus on presence, mood and lyricism, it runs counter to the current preoccupation with politically-charged installations."

By casting his sculptural objects from polyester resin, or else incising them directly into the gallery wall, Senini introduces an element of ephemerality to his work, as the form is determined by the interplay of light and shadow. In *All That's Left* (1996), for example, he presents a fibreglass sarcophagus. In casting this work, he first created a clay-coated styrofoam shell, which he subsequently encased in five to ten layers of polyester resin. Once the resin was dry, he removed the styrofoam and began scraping off clay that had adhered to the object's interior. Through judicious use of his scraping technique, he was able to create a variegated tonal pattern similar to marble. Once the interior was finished, he turned his attention to the exterior, heavily scoring the top



of the sarcophagus with a nail. By doing so, he prevents gallery light from penetrating the ordinarily translucent material, thereby reinforcing the illusion of solidity. But light does enter from the sides, creating an inner glow. Unfortunately, this effect is marred somewhat by the further incision of line drawings into the sarcophagus walls. The drawings, which are based on prehistoric African rock paintings, are an apparent attempt by Senini to blend Animist and Christian beliefs into an all-inclusive global religion. But I found their graffiti-like presence to be distracting.

In this exhibition, *All That's Left* was installed in front of *A Safe Place* (1996). The latter consists of five brown "bells" carved into the gallery wall at above eye level. Like the sarcophagus, the bells allude to Christian burial rituals. By casting one half of each bell in polyester resin, Senini fashioned a series of negative reliefs, which he subsequently implanted in the wall. From a distance, the bells create a trompe l'oeil effect, as we initially assume they exist in positive space. Because the fibreglass casts are translucent, their colour is determined by the interior composition of the wall. This interrelationship gives the work a sense of invasive permanence that is at odds with

conventional installation strategies, where the gallery's physical integrity is scrupulously maintained. Although *All That's Left* and *A Safe Place* were conceived as separate installations, their placement in the same gallery space makes associative readings inevitable. From a certain perspective, it appears as if the bells have floated off the sarcophagus and are now resting on a graphite-delineated table top. But because the two gallery entrances are located at off-angles to this ideal perspective, the illusion is shattered before viewers even have a chance to experience it.

In *And you want to travel with her...* (1992), Senini continues his intrusion into the gallery's institutional sanctity, presenting an incised impression of an arctic tern wing. On the floor beneath the wing is a graphite-coated rock with a suitcase handle attached. The piece was inspired by a canoe trip Senini took in northern Canada. While paddling on the river, he spotted a tern, which alighted on a nearby rock. In replicating the wing, Senini relied on an Audubon drawing. By enlarging it to fit his own body, he alludes to the Christian belief in angels as spiritual beings superior to humanity in power and intelligence. But by executing the wing in negative space, so that its definition is dependent entirely on gallery spotlights, he

reminds viewers that this belief is largely a product of faith. The rock, in contrast, is very heavy. With its attached handle, it functions as a physical manifestation of Senini's inability to join the bird in flight. In this context, flying serves as a metaphor for the state of grace achieved by the bird by virtue of it being fully integrated into its environment. No longer guided strictly by instinct, humanity is in the process of establishing a new relationship with nature. That Senini longs to return to an earlier, less angst-ridden age is indicated by the sculpture's title, which is taken from a lyric in Leonard Cohen's song *Suzanne*.

Through his manipulation of positive and negative space, Senini creates an androgynous sculptural environment. (In feminist art theory, positive evocations of space are associated with the male desire to symbolically replicate the phallus, while female sculptors are much more inclined to explore the interior void). In *Shape of the Light* (1996), he presents an omega-shaped object that is capable of both positive and negative readings. To this reviewer, it recalls a headstone. But in an interview, Senini noted that his original intention was to create a negative impression of the doorway leading from his livingroom to his sun-lit kitchen. Read

Blake Senini, *A Safe Place*, 1996. Polyester resin, graphite. Installation: 291 x 325 x 9.6 cm; *Au sol*: Blake Senini, *All That's Left*, 1996. Polyester resin, clay, 78.7 x 233 x 69.1 cm. Photo: Don Hall. Courtesy of the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

Blake Senini, *Hell*, 1996. Polyester resin. Installation: 367 x 221 x 34.5 cm. Photo: Don Hall. Courtesy of the MacKenzie Art Gallery.



this way, the translucent fibreglass serves as a magic portal, like Alice's looking-glass, offering viewers access to an alternative reality. This interpretation is reinforced by strong back-lighting, which makes readily visible the shadows of gallery visitors on the other side of the fifteen centimetre thick structure. Closer inspection of the wall reveals various bits of plant matter, dust and pet hairs that adhered to the resin during casting. Senini's studio is situated in a converted garage. Because of the toxic nature of the resin, he often works with the doors thrown open to the outside garden. He regards the resulting contamination as part of the working process, which for Senini is very meditative, where he works and reworks the fibreglass surface with various hand tools to achieve the desired outcome. Like the sarcophagus discussed above, this piece was also fashioned using a clay

tile support. But here, the tiles were wrapped in fabric, so there was no clay residue. Although there is a discernible "brick" pattern where the resin impregnated individual tiles. The overall effect detracts from the installation's stated intention to operate as a mystical gateway to another dimension.

In positive terms, the object resembles a headstone. This reading is strengthened by an adjacent sculpture, *Hell* (1996), which consists of a vaulted fibreglass "window". Senini distinguishes the window from its darker-toned frame by decreasing the thickness of the fibreglass. Beneath the window is a relief sculpture of a bell. Strongly evocative of a church, the installation recalls the dramatic natural lighting Senini encountered during a recent visit to Italy ("hell" is a European term used to describe a special quality of light). The bell, in contrast, is modelled

after a Mexican church bell. Its presence here speaks to the issue of religious imperialism. When a Spanish settlement was established in the New World, precious resources were directed toward commissioning a church bell from a Spanish foundry and transporting it across the Atlantic Ocean to North America. Once installed in the church, it would ring out over land originally occupied by an indigenous population that, prior to the arrival of Spanish missionaries, had been non-Catholic.

Senini's implied criticism of the Church is underscored by his placement of a second sculptural object beside the bell. Ostensibly grounded in abstraction, the four-tiered symmetrical object defies easy interpretation. It is, in fact, a three-dimensional representation of an ink blot. By pairing such an insubstantial object with a church bell, Senini highlights the arbitrariness with which we invest objects with religious significance. But this isn't necessarily meant to mock the Church. It could just be Senini's way of reminding us to seek the sacred in everyday life. By making his sculptures from light-weight fibreglass, Senini injects an element of anti-heroism into two disciplines that have traditionally been rife with heroism: religion and art. The only true heroism, he seems to suggest, is in the willingness of people such as French writer Simone Weil (to whom the exhibition is dedicated) to struggle in the face of great hardship to realize their hopes and dreams. ■

Blake Senini, *Simone*
MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Sask.
March 15—June 16, 1996

Avec l'exposition *Dedicated to Simone Weil*, l'artiste de Calgary Blake Senini met en évidence les aspirations inassouvies qui résident au coeur de notre malaise spirituel. Proche de la sculpture européenne et québécoise, son travail se situe au croisement des références culturelles de Jocelyne Allouche, des jeux de sens et de matériaux de Gilles Mihalcean, et du minimalisme de Anish Kapoor. Ses installations, à contre-courant de la tendance actuelle axée sur le politique, mettent l'accent sur la présence, l'atmosphère et le lyrisme. En moulant des objets en résine, en les incorporant aux murs de la galerie, en jouant avec l'ombre et la lumière, le trompe-l'oeil, et la manipulation des espaces négatifs et positifs, Senini incorpore une notion d'éphémère. De plus, il introduit dans ses oeuvres une notion d'anti-héroïsme dans les domaines traditionnellement dominés par l'héroïsme: l'art et la religion. Pour Senini, le seul véritable héroïsme se retrouve chez des gens comme Simone Weil qui cherchent coûte que coûte à réaliser leurs rêves et leurs espoirs.